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Drinda O'Connor Memoir

O'Connor, Drinda

Interview and memoir

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UIS Alumni Sage Society

O'Connor was a stay-at-home mom who decided to take some classes at the newly-opened Sangamon State University to finish a degree in Communication. She participated in the CLEP program and worked with two professors, Gary Morgan and Sue Esslinger, who helped students to receive credit for their life experiences.

Interview by Karen Hasara, 2009

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Narrator: Drinda O'Connor
Interviewer: Karen Hasara
Date: August 11, 2009

Q. This is Karen Hasara. It is August 11, 2009, and I am interviewing Drinda O'Connor. Drinda, when did you arrive at Sangamon State and how did you happen to do that?

A. Well, I started in about 1980. I had been a stay-at-home mom. I'd gotten married right after high school, had two children, but always loved learning. So I wasn't so much interested in a degree at the beginning as it was just the opportunity for learning.

Q. And why Sangamon State as compared to somewhere else?

A. Well I was already 30 years old and I thought, and I'd heard about Sangamon State from others. I knew it was in the community, and I'd heard that they had a wonderful CLEP program. That was Credit for Prior Learning. And if you would study and go through a battery of tests, you could have your junior college years waived and that was particularly attractive since I was going to be going part time. But I also wanted to get right into the learning at the courses that I wanted to choose more so than so many electives.

Q. So you really didn't start there to start a career or to be able to do something with a particular degree?

A. I think I kind of made it up as I went along. I started with the idea that I wanted to learn just purely for learning's sake. Fairly quickly, I realized that if I were going to do all of that learning and work that hard, I might as well pick a career path. I also was in the process after a year or so of getting a divorce so then I realized I was going to be working. So I had to really think then about trying to fast track that degree so that I could get a job and support my children.

Q. What prior learning did you have before you applied at Sangamon State?

A. You know I really worried about because I had never set foot on a college before. I'm from the south originally and my family, as with so many other families at that time, education just wasn't something women did as much. I am the first person in my family to get a degree. So I had to sort of look at things a little differently and think about how to get there.

Q. Tell me a little bit more about the CLEP program. Most people probably have never heard of it. But it's an unusual way to get into college, but it's a real credit to you that you were able to get in. But talk about what you had to do.

A. I thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed it. There was a group of professors who worked part time with the CLEP students. Two that come to mind were Gary Morgan... there were two good in particular, Gary Morgan and Sue Esslinger, and Sue Esslinger taught the math portion. In order

to pass the CLEP process, you had to take a battery, I believe it was about six different tests. And then you were graded against other students who had finished two years of college. So you had to test out well enough to show that you had this prior learning, so I had to study for math, English, humanities, history, several different areas. Probably humanities was where I felt that I was the weakest, you know, I'd read a lot my entire life, I've always loved to read.

But I don't think I knew enough about art and paintings and so that one was a little harder for me. But the math, I just did extremely well in and I was proud to say that I tested out to the 96th percentile in the math category, which was very high for someone who had never been to college.

Q. That's wonderful. About how many were in the classes that you took?

A. There were anywhere from 6 to 15, 18 I would say each night that we had classes. Not all of them went on and finished. Some of them dropped out, some did finish, and then some decided to try a different path. I'm not saying it was real difficult, but you did have to kind of apply yourself and look at each area.

Q. Do you know, did most of those people they called it CLEP'd in, did they end up getting their degree?

A. I don't really know the statistics that is interesting. I'll be sure to kind of check into that. I know of the people that I went through the CLEP process with, I know of only one other one other than myself that actually finished and got a bachelor's degree. I'm sure there are others that I just don't know as well. But of the half a dozen that I probably was closest to going through that process some... one moved away, you know different reasons, but not everyone finished other than a couple of us that I recall.

Q. And I suppose that the reason we needed that program was because Sangamon State was a Junior and Senior level college, so...

A. Exactly, and with the average age of students being 30 and most of them were in the workforce, starting out at the junior college level, it was a little daunting especially for those full time employees trying to study, raise families. And so the thinking was that if you were willing to apply yourself and could pass this battery of tests and prove that you had used those prior years to learn a lot, just not necessarily in a degree setting, that you could prove that you had what it took to get into Sangamon State.

Q. Do you know if it would be high school students, I suppose now that would be... Do they still have the program?

A. I think they have it, but it's different today. I looked into it again when I thought about pursuing the master's program a few years back. And so they have something similar, but it's not quite the way it was in the early 1980s when I took the course.

Q. And of course now with freshmen and sophomores at the university, they can enter as freshmen.

A. Exactly, exactly.

Q. And go through the classes, which you couldn't have done.

A. No, I couldn't.

Q. Not there anyway at that time. What was your degree in? And tell me a little bit about your experience at Sangamon State.

A. My degree was in Communications. I really had to think hard about what do I want to do, what do I want to get a degree in. And I felt like Communications was something that was a general area that I could pull a lot of different pieces in from different classes as electives to pursue my real passion, which was learning about a lot of things.

Q. That's wonderful. And did you graduate then in two years?

A. I think it was more like two and a half, almost three because I went to school in the evenings. My children were young, and I chose to stay at home with them during the day and try to pursue my education mostly in the evenings so that my husband would be at home to watch the children.

Q. I'm sure that was common at the time.

A. Certainly was.

Q. And for other students.

A. Certainly was.

Q. Tell us a little bit about your initial impressions, especially not ever having been to college before. What was it like when you first started at Sangamon State?

A. It was very scary. For people who know me now, they would laugh. But I was a little bit timid about the whole process. As I said earlier, I had never stepped inside a college. So I was very excited about the opportunity and where it might take me. But I didn't understand, you know, where to go get in the right line and what would I have to fill out, and what would they want from me besides money. Those kinds of things, I just didn't understand the process. And when you don't understand the process, it can make you a little nervous or a little hesitant, but I wanted it badly enough that I got in the right line and persevered.

Q. Do you remember what some of the classes were that you particularly liked and some of the instructors?

A. I think honestly I enjoyed almost every class. I especially liked the communication classes that focused on management. I had a hard time with some of them, not grade wise. But, for me, they often... a management class would draw largely on your management experience in the work place. I had never worked outside the home, so I didn't have those management experiences to draw on to write papers in some of my management classes.

So I had to get very creative, and I had been the President of my children's school PTA. So I would have to use those experiences and then quickly realized that if you can motivate a large group of volunteers, that is a good management technique and tool that you do have more experience in than you think. So I had to often look for examples that were a little different from everyone else's because I hadn't worked outside the home.

Q. Do you remember some of the professors that made an impression on you?

A. I do. I think I remember Larry Smith, who was someone that was always very helpful to me. Most of them went out of their way to be kind and to be helpful. Probably the one I remember the most was a woman named Wilma Hoyt, and she taught one of the most unusual classes that I'd ever... well, it was probably my second class that I took. It was on women's studies, and I was very interested in that concept.

But I will never forget, my first night in the class, she had written down words on the blackboard that were all words that were used to describe women in a negative way. Many of them were curse words or just awful words that throughout history, people had used to describe women. So everyone had to say the words and then talk about what they meant and how they felt. And that was the most odd experience in my lifetime. It was unusual.

Q. And you remember it.

A. I remember it, but I did enjoy it. I understood quickly what the subject was about and why it was okay. But it was... just kind of takes one aback to walk into a classroom and see curse words written all over the blackboard.

Q. What buildings were at the university by the time you went. I mean, was the campus pretty well developed?

A. It was fairly well developed. The library was there. I remember fondly how, or not so fondly, the sidewalks that appeared to go nowhere, especially on a cold winter night when you were going back to your car at nearly ten o'clock at night and it's snowing and windy. And not as many building as there are today to break that wind so there was just a lot of sidewalks that we laughed and said didn't go anywhere because there were more sidewalks than there were buildings that appeared to be.

Q. Was the workload difficult and was there a lot work, a lot of papers to write?

A. There were a lot of papers to write, but I honestly really, really enjoyed it. I liked to write and I enjoyed having the opportunity and because by the time I had gotten into... finished with the CLEP program, and gotten into going to the regular classes even though I still went mostly evenings, I had more of my days sometimes, once the kids were taking a nap or whatever, to where I could really get a block of time to really sit and enjoy writing a paper and exploring something. So you know, it was tough, but it was certainly manageable and I just really enjoyed the learning aspect.

Q. How long were the... did you go through the CLEP program before you actually were admitted into the university?

A. Probably less than six months, I'd say. A girlfriend and I had signed up together. She later moved to St. Louis before getting into the university with the CLEP program. But she was also a stay-at-home mom and so we would practice during the day when the kids were at the YMCA for a swimming lesson or taking a nap or something, we would get the books out and talk each other through some of the different categories and that just made that more fun as well.

Q. Do you still have involvement at the university? Do you keep in touch with people? Do you participate in things at the university?

A. I do. I belong to the SAGE Alumni group and I thoroughly enjoy that. I try to make sure I give contributions every year to the university because I am very appreciative of it being in our community. I still have some friends that I took some early classes with that we still see each other socially occasionally. And then of course, we always see professors and others, employees out in the community because we're a smaller community. So I think I keep in touch with quite a few folks.

Q. After you graduated, how did you use your degree? Did you go to work? Did it help develop a career?

A. It did. I think when I started out I thought that I just needed the piece of paper to prove that I had a degree to open some doors. But I was one of those lucky folks who was sitting next to someone in a class one day and I saying I was looking for a job and we were really close to graduating. And my colleague in the class said, we have something open in our office if you'd be willing to come in and interview.

It turned out it was Governor Thompson's office and someone had resigned and left the area to move away real quickly. And so there were anxious to fill the position immediately, so by having that acquaintance I was able to go the next day, interview, and be hired in less than a week.

Q. And what did you do in that first job?

A. Oh, the first job, actually it was a fill-in position so it was probably more clerical than anything. I will admit to being a little bit nervous about getting labeled starting in purely a clerical position. At the time, many women were still starting in that arena, but I knew that I also didn't have the best clerical skills. I'm kind of a hunt and peck typist to this day, so I was a little nervous about not having the right skills. But I was assured that if I would fill this position for a few months just to help them out, then they would move me up to something more suitable, and they did.

Q. And what finally... did one thing lead to another?

A. It did, yes. After starting at the bottom, armed with my brand new piece of paper and my brand new college degree, and starting at the bottom, within three months, I'd say, I would say I was working as a special assistant to the deputy governor. Jerry Blakemore was the first African-American deputy governor under Thompson.

Q. Then as far as your career is concerned, how did it continue to develop?

A. Well after working for Jerry Blakemore, who was really a mentor to me, I was able to move up and become the director of the governor's Office of Citizens Assistance and Consumer Affairs. And that opened up a lot of other opportunities. I got on the National Board of the Futures Association and different things with consumer issues and got real involved even at the national level, speaking out on consumer issues. Thompson was very big on consumer rights and so we did a lot in that area. So that was an area that I was able to move into and do some really interesting things.

Q. Looking back, how do you assess the value of the education that you received at Sangamon State?

A. Well it would be kind of cliché to say that it just broadened my horizons, but that's truly what it did. I didn't have all the opportunities that some folks have had prior to going to school. So it opened up a whole new world both in the learning about subject matter issues but also people, relating to a larger group of people, people with education. It just changed my whole life. I just feel very blessed that Sangamon State was in the community at the time that I was able to take advantage of it.

End of Interview

17 minutes 39 seconds